Why Organizations Go Off Course – Lesson 5: Don't Make the Urgent the Enemy of the Important
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I'm in the process of writing a long article entitled: *Why Organizations Go Off Course.* The article details a series of lessons I learned while growing the Oregon League of Conservation Voters (OLCV),[1] buttressed by my observations of dozens of other groups both in Oregon and across the country.

This series offers a counterpoint to the lessons in my other series: *Why Organizations Thrive.*

Why Organizations Go off Course Lesson Five is: Don't Let the Urgent Become the Enemy of the Important

Organizations that develop a culture of focusing on the urgent often wind up failing to tackle important tasks.

This language is taken directly from Stephen Covey's book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People.*

Covey's Third Habit is to "Put First Things First." In explaining that in terms of time management, he divides the world into four quadrants based on two continuums. One continuum is whether an activity is important or unimportant. The second continuum is whether the activity is urgent or not urgent, with urgency about its time-sensitivity, not its importance. .

Covey's central point: most people are good at focusing on those things that are both urgent and important. But, what sets apart highly functioning people is they are also good at focusing on those things that are important, but not urgent. In contrast, less effective people get caught up in urgent, but unimportant tasks.

How does this apply to nonprofit organizations instead of people?

Let's start by displaying Covey's point graphically.

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[1] I served as OLCV's Executive Director from 1997-2009. During that time, we grew from a permanent staff of 1.5 to 11, and a budget of around $200,000 to more than $1 million.

	Urgent	**Not Urgent**
Important	• Crises • Pressing problems • Important projects with deadlines	• Relationship Building • Planning • Recognizing new opportunities • Prevention
Unimportant	• Interruptions • Most phone calls and email • Some meetings • Popular activities	• Trivia • Busy work • Some mail and phone calls • Time wasters

Adapted from Stephen Covey's 7 Habits, Page 151

The first thing to note is that Covey clearly wrote in the pre-Facebook era, or else his first example under unimportant/not urgent would have been "check Facebook!"

On a more serious note, while Covey's chart is intended for individuals, in my experience there is a similar breakdown of activities for organizations.

Let me give you three examples of the urgent/not important that organizations often spend too much time on:

- Low performing fundraising events. Because events come with inherent internal deadlines both in preparing for and running the event, they create artificial time urgency. Yet, in the long run, many low-performing fundraising events are simply not important to an organization's financial health. They create artificial time urgency, but they are not important.

- Spending board time on short-term policy/politics. Particularly for advocacy-focused nonprofits, board meetings can become dominated by backwards looking gossip about who said what, where things stand, and what the organization should do next week responding to some policy proposal. It's urgent in the moment. But in the scheme of things for an organization's board, it's not important, since the board's role should be focused on strategic governance and resources.

- Leadership attending too many meetings. I've repeatedly been told by Executive Directors that the biggest barrier to their raising more money is carving out the time to do so. Yet, I then witness them attending meetings where there participation is nice, but of

limited importance. Meetings, because they have territory on a calendar, create an artificial urgency. It has to be done right now because it's in the calendar.

Organizations that thrive rarely focus on low dollar fundraising events, unless the work can be offloaded from the staff and board to other volunteers.

Organizations that thrive rarely have their board spend time on policy details or decisions that are about the next week.

Organizations that thrive have leaders who learn quickly to say "no" to meetings that are urgent, but unimportant.

Beyond these examples, here are four additional practical steps nonprofit organizations can take to make sure they're not letting the urgent be the enemy of the important.

1. Plan dedicated time at board meetings to discuss one aspect of long-term capacity every board meeting. Rather than having rushed conversations at board meetings because it feels "urgent" to be comprehensive at board meetings, recognize that unimportant topics can be left off board meeting agendas.

2. Make sure your review of staff performance (including the Executive Director) places equal weight on evaluating performance on long-term capacity building work as it does on how they respond to more urgent short-term challenges.

3. In creating yearly work plans, go back over an initial draft of the work plan and think consciously about Covey's four quadrants and how they apply to the major activities in the plan. Are you eliminating the unimportant/not urgent whenever possible? Are you minimizing the urgent/unimportant, while playing up the important, not urgent?

4. Articulate organizational priorities. As things come up, this will help the staff quickly assess where something is on the "important" versus "unimportant" continuum.

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